

ARMADILLOS

Headings and Trigger words
Use this column to write down
a heading and trigger words to
summarise each paragraph.

Armadillos are the only mammals with shells. The nine-banded armadillo is the most common of the armadillos.

The nine-banded armadillo has long pointy ears, a long snout, and is the size of a cat or small dog. Armadillos have an excellent sense of smell and good hearing but they are almost blind and can't see colours.

The most obvious feature of this very unusual looking mammal is the joined plates that cover its back and sides which look like the armour worn by medieval knights. The armour is made of bone and consists of a large shield over the shoulders, a second shield over the rump, and nine bands in the middle. These are connected by soft skin and each band overlaps the band before it. These narrow plates give it flexibility around its middle. Its short legs and long tail are also covered with bony rings. The armour protects the armadillo from attack by predators and from sharp, thorny vegetation in the forest undergrowth.

When the armadillo is in water the heavy armour shell causes it to sink and allows the armadillo to walk across the riverbed under water. It can hold its breath for as long as six minutes. If it wants to get across a wider stretch of water the armadillo swallows air until its stomach inflates to twice its normal size. It is then buoyant enough to swim across.

Armadillos survive best in warm conditions. They have a low body temperature with very little body hair and their armour provides little insulation against the cold. The hot tropical rainforest is ideal. They are very active burrowers who dig underground about 50cm below the surface. Their burrows may be up to ten metres in length with several entrances. They use grass, leaves, and other vegetation to create a nest or bedding area. A single armadillo may have as many as 15 different burrows in the area it lives in.

Armadillos are mainly insect eaters (insectivores). The forest floor of the rainforest provides an enormous variety of food to feed from. They make a lot of noise when foraging and can usually be seen rummaging through leaf litter for insects with their snout close to the ground. Food can be smelt up to 20cm below the surface and is dug out using their large front claws. They dig, push their nose into the loosened soil, and shoot out their long, sticky tongue to collect ants, beetles, termites, worms, and grubs. They are usually active at night and hide during the day but in cooler seasons they will forage during the warm daylight hours and return to a burrow in the evening.

Nine-banded armadillos always give birth to four identical babies. The babies are well developed at birth with their eyes open. Their skin is like soft pink leather and slowly hardens. They quickly begin to move around the burrow and after a few weeks will begin to forage for food with the mother. They are fully mature after one year. Armadillos have the ability to delay pregnancies for up to two years if the conditions are not favourable for the young. Their life span in the wild is between four to seven years.

During the breeding season a male and female armadillo will share a burrow. However, for the rest of the time armadillos live alone. Any contact with another armadillo is very brief and they do not fight over territories.

Armadillos are hunted and eaten by larger mammals. When it feels threatened an armadillo will run away and find a place to hide or burrow underground with amazing speed. Once it is inside a burrow it is very hard to remove. It will present its armoured back to the opening so there is nothing to grab onto. The armour also acts as barbs that dig into the earth if a predator tries to drag it out. If an armadillo is startled by a noise it will jump a metre straight up in the air. This will surprise a predator and give the armadillo time to escape.



Armadillos are hunted by man for their meat, which is considered a delicacy, and for their decorative shell. Although their natural rainforest habitat is being destroyed, the nine-banded armadillo is able to survive in other habitats and is now very common further north of the Amazon rain forest. In fact it is now the official state mammal of Texas. Armadillos are helpful to farmers because they eat many insects that are harmful to crops.